War With Mexico:
The Northern Campaign, 1846-1847

By Paul K. Walker

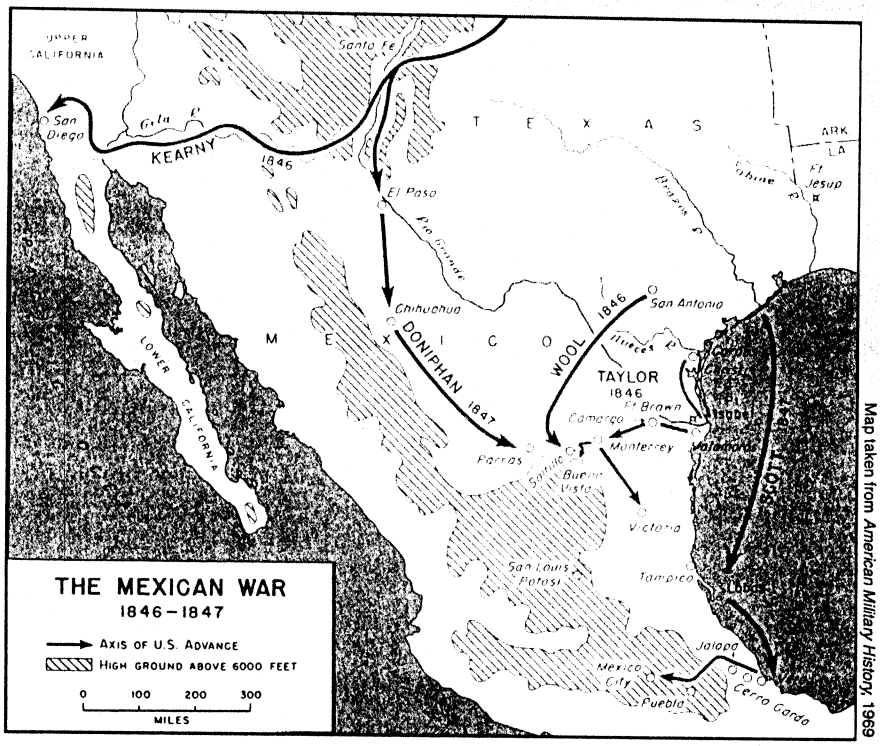
In the mid-1840s, the United States and Mexico went to war over the annexation of Texas as a state and an unresolved boundary dispute. Mexico claimed the Nueces River; the U.S. claimed the more southerly Rio Grande.

As the crisis worsened, the U.S. Army readied for possible hostilities. Authorized strength was only 8,500, but in 1845 considerably fewer men were available for service. The situation resulted from a long period of relative peace and traditional bias against standing armies and large military budgets in favor of the militia.

The Army's engineers were organized in two corps—a Corps of Engineers and a Corps of Topographical Engineers. The Corps of Engineers, under Colonel Joseph G. Totten, numbered 43 officers; the Topographical Engineers, under Colonel James W. Abert, numbered 36. The top graduates of West Point filled their ranks. Indeed, a West Point education was a unifying factor among the engineers who served in the war with Mexico.

By the 1840s, the Corps of Engineers' primary duties involved coastal fortifications, while the topographers (topogs) were engaged in river and harbor improvements, road building, Western exploration, and mapping. Neither corps had a troop unit assigned to it and had to rely on soldiers detailed from other branches and hired civilians.

In June 1845, President James K. Polk ordered Brevet Brigadier General Zachary Taylor to move his forces from Louisiana to Texas. Taylor first set up camp on the Nueces River at Corpus Christi (on the northern edge of the disputed territory). By fall his force numbered 4,000, about two-thirds of the actual strength of the entire regular Army. Initially Taylor had two engineers and three topographers with him.



Map taken from *American Military History*, 1969

Second Lieutenant George G. Meade, a topographer, was one of them.

After a diplomatic mission failed, President Polk ordered Taylor to move through the disputed territory to the Rio Grande. On 8 March 1846, Taylor set out for Matamoros. Captain Jared K. F. Mansfield led the reconnaissance and selected camp sites along the 150-mile route. After they reached the north bank of the Rio Grande, across from Matamoros, there was little rest for the engineers. The topographers reconnoitered the surrounding area, while Mansfield directed construction of a 6-bastioned earthen fortress capable of holding 2,000 men and their horses.

The stage was set for conflict. On 24 April 1846, Mexican forces ambushed an American patrol, killing or wounding 16 soldiers. Two battles followed in early May. One, at a watering hole called Palo Alto on the way to Matamoros, gave Lieutenant Jacob Blake (a topographer), his moment of glory. Blake volunteered to inspect the enemy's positions. An artillery captain described the action: Blake "dashed off from the right of our line to within musket-shot of the enemy's left. Here he dismounted, and with his field glass coolly counted the number of men in one of the enemy's squadrons, which of course enabled him accurately to estimate the enemy's entire cavalry force. Blake then remounted his horse and galloped from left to right of the enemy's line, stopping from time to time and carefully observing the formation and number of his infantry, as well as the position, number, and calibre of his field guns; all of which information was fully verified by the subsequent events of the day." Blake's report helped the outnumbered Americans prevail.

In official reports, maps, and drawings, the Topographical Engineers of the Mexican War period helped detail the wonder and beauty of a vast, previously unknown territory. Lieutenant James Abert's sketch of Cheyennes is an example.

Meade also described his role at Palo Alto: "I was in the action during the whole time, at the side of General Taylor and communicating his orders. I may justly say I have had my '*Baptem de feu*!' An officer of the general's staff had his horse shot under him, not two yards from me, and some five horses and men were killed at various times close to me." The Mexicans retreated, but Taylor encountered them again the next day a few miles south at Resaca de la Palma. In what amounted to a pitched infantry battle, experienced American regulars and the skilled leadership of junior officers helped carry the day.

After the two battles, Taylor commended Blake and Meade, as well as Lieutenant Wood, another topographer, who helped set up and fire the artillery's 18-pound cannon at Resaca de la Palma. In those two days of battle, American casualties totalled 175, with less than 40 killed, and Mexican casualties numbered 1,000.

The Mexican army retreated across the Rio Grande to Matamoros, but Taylor did not pursue them. He was outnumbered and lacked equipment to cross the river. The delay frustrated Meade. In his view, Taylor had the time but did not know how to use his staff, especially his engineers. "Had Taylor known," Meade wrote, "he would have had us at work experimenting and when any plan proved successful, had a bridge constructed and put in depot, and then on the tenth (of May), in three or four hours, the whole army, artillery and all, could have crossed and the Mexican army been prevented from retreating with some twelve pieces of artillery." By the time the American soldiers crossed the river eight days later, using captured boats, the enemy had withdrawn. Matamoros belonged to Taylor, but the Mexican army remained alive.

Slow communications kept word of the 24 April attack and American deaths from President Polk until the evening of 9 May. That news was all he needed to obtain a declaration of war from Congress, along with $10 million, an increase in authorized Army strength to 18,000 by expanding existing units, and authority to raise 50,000 volunteers.

On 15 May 1846, Congress established a 100-man company of sappers, miners, and pontoniers whose duties included assisting laborers in erecting fortifications and then supervising the finished fortifications. The company was to consist of 10 sergeants, 10 corporals, 78 privates first and second class, and two musicians. This unit was the forerunner of today's 1st Engineer Battalion, stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas.

For years, Chief Engineer Totten had argued in vain for such a company. Commanding General of the Army Winfield Scott, a staunch admirer of the engineers, had echoed his support. But it took a declaration of war to win Congressional approval.

Even so, preparations had been underway at West Point. From the faculty, Captain Alexander Swift was designated for command and had already spent two years at the French school of military engineering at Metz. When Congress acted, Swift

selected Lieutenant Gustavus W. Smith, a fellow faculty member, as his second in command. Experienced in company administration and infantry drill, Smith complemented Swift's technical expertise. As the third officer for what would be known as Company A of Engineers, they selected George B. McClellan, a soon-to-graduate cadet.

The three officers immediately began the challenging job of obtaining equipment and recruiting and training men. Totten's instructions were specific: "We must have smart, able-bodied young men, who can read and write, and have knowledge of a relevant mechanical trade." He urged Swift not to recruit married men and naturalized citizens and declared that, except for the musicians (buglers), their minimum height should be 5'6" with preference for those 5'8" to 5'10."

Promotions in the Army were rare. Lacking a retirement program and a mandatory retirement age, senior officers stayed on and many were too old to serve in the field. McClellan was ecstatic to be graduating and immediately going to war. "Hip! Hip! Hurrah!" he wrote home. "Ain't it glorious!" George Derby, another member of the class of 1846 who joined the topographers, wrote to his mother, "Nothing is heard but promotion, glory, and laurels."

Still, recruitment was slow. The company never reached full complement and waited until 12 September for orders to join Taylor's army in Texas. Finally on 26 September, 3 officers and 71 enlistees with basic training at West Point under their belts, sailed from New York harbor. All but two were native-born. Only four had previous military experience. After arriving in Texas in December, Company A moved to Tampico and became involved in preparations for Vera Cruz.

Meanwhile Taylor's army in Texas grew by adding new recruits, volunteers, and topographers. Captain William G. Williams was fresh from the Great Lakes survey when he became Taylor's chief topographic engineer.

In early August, Taylor started for his next objective—Monterey, the capital of the Mexican province of Nueva Leon, which had a population of 10,000. His engineers accompanied an advance party to reconnoiter and repair the roads. As Taylor drew near, Captain Mansfield's party obtained information on the city's defenses. Based on Mansfield's findings, Taylor decided to cut off Monterey from the west.

The attack began on 20 September. Officers of both engineer corps participated, fighting side-by-side and working together on reconnaissance and planning assaults. Chief topographer Williams died in the fighting, and Mansfield was wounded. On the 24th, the Mexican commander offered to surrender if he could withdraw his army and obtain an 8-week truce. Taylor agreed. For their parts in the action, several engineers received brevet promotions.

This news from Mexico angered President Polk, and he ordered Taylor to resume operations. Meanwhile, Polk recognized it would take more than a few victories in the north to bring the Mexican government to the peace table. Adopting a new strategy, he shifted operations from northern Mexico and put General Scott in charge of a landing at Vera Cruz and a march to Mexico City. This decision assured that Taylor's army would soon be severely reduced in size and that the remaining units would become in essence an army of occupation on the defensive in northern Mexico.

Before that happened, Taylor fought one last battle at Buena Vista in February 1847. Joining him were forces under Brigadier General John E. Wool, who had advanced into Mexico from San Antonio. Wool brought with him a strong engineer component, including West Point graduates Captains Robert E. Lee and William D. Fraser. Captain George W. Hughes, one of the few non-West Pointers involved, was chief topographic engineer. On their way to join Taylor, Wool's army made the 164-mile march to the Rio Grande in just 11 days, using roads and bridges provided by the engineers. Unlike Taylor, Wool planned his Rio Grande crossing in advance. Led by Lee, the engineers assembled a 'flying bridge,' prefabricated in San Antonio, which carried Wool's men across in a single day. From there, they proceeded in stages deeper into Mexico.

Hughes' report on the march detailed the difficult challenges and significant roles of engineers and topographers. The going was not easy. Hughes related: "We were almost literally compelled to grope our way and like a ship at sea to determine our positions by astronomical observations. Thus topographical parties usually had to be kept on the advance seeking camps and supplies of water, food, and fuel."

At Buena Vista, Taylor met a large Mexican army under General Santa Anna. In a complicated battle on 23 February 1847, the American forces formed a wide-angle "V" to turn the battle against the Mexicans. It was one of the most vicious engagements of the war. Once again, the engineers and topographers earned recognition and brevet promotions for their actions. As was their custom, the topographers prepared a detailed after-the-battle map of the action.

As the war in northern Mexico came to a close, peace was still more than a year away. The U.S. Army began to reflect on some sobering lessons of the campaign. Engineers had proven they could work together on the march and on the battlefield. Commanders had an opportunity to see firsthand the results of years of training at West Point.

The war with Mexico was the United States' only major war between 1815 and 1861. As such, it was a training ground for the Civil War.

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All quoted material is taken from the following sources:

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